

Talking about people with disability

Everyone has individual interests, skills, needs and personalities. A person's disability is only one of their many characteristics and should not overshadow all their other traits that make them a unique human being.

For example, a school newspaper runs a headline about one of its students, announcing: "Gavin: one of the youngest crew members to sail around Australia". The paper describes the preparations made by Gavin, the help provided by his family, and the time the trip took. The paper does not mention that Gavin had a disability because this is no more relevant to the story than the fact that Gavin has red hair.

At other times it can be helpful to name a person's disability. This can be useful to give a general idea about a student's learning, or it may be required when seeking additional resourcing, or when signalling that specialised support is needed. To reduce stereotyping and keep the focus on the individual, "person first" language should be used, unless the person requests otherwise. For example, "student with autism" is recommended over "autistic student".

However the words used to describe people with disability can also shape expectations in a negative way. Labels can send a message that the disability is in the student, rather than focusing on possible supports. Individuals can experience discrimination because other people expect little of them and therefore give them a limited range of opportunities to fulfil their potential. In school, if staff have low expectations, this can lead to students inadvertently not being treated on the same basis as other students.

Low expectations are more likely to occur if a "deficit" approach is adopted, where the focus is on what people with disability cannot do. For example, a person being labelled as unable to walk and "confined to a wheelchair". This deficit approach downplays other ways of moving around aside from walking, and ignores the fact that wheelchairs can be liberating, not "confining".

In contrast, an enabling approach considers what the person CAN do, with or without support. For example, a person can move with support and "uses a wheelchair for mobility". In a similar "social" model of disability, the limitation is society's approach to the person with disability, not the disability itself. This approach emphasises that it is everyone's responsibility to ensure the person with disability is treated fairly.

Here are some other terms that are limiting or enabling

Limiting	Enabling
Disabled, Crippled, Handicapped, Invalid	People/ Person with disability
Suffers from, victim of... (This suggests the person is to be pitied. This is demeaning)	Person with/ people with/person living with....
Wheelchair-bound/ confined to a wheelchair/ (This suggests a person is passive)	Wheelchair user
The disabled (This is impersonal and suggest people with disability are all alike and separate from the rest of society)	People with disability